

Alexander Mackenzie (1764-1820)



Lionized for his speed and efficiency in penetrating new lands as he sought a route to the Pacific, condemned and celebrated for the way he drove men as he pursued his goals, the powerfully built Alexander Mackenzie had no illusions about why he was drawn to the unexplored tracts of Rupert's Land. Soon after completing his second historic journey, he candidly expressed his feelings toward the Athabasca district in a personal letter: "I think it unpardonable in any man to remain in this country who can afford to leave it." Before he turned thirty years old, Mackenzie could afford to leave.

He was born at Stornoway, on the Isle of Lewis, Scotland, in 1764. His mother died early in his life. When Alexander was about ten years old, his father moved the family to New York. But only months after they arrived, the American War of Independence broke out, and Mackenzie's father was called away to fight for the king. The young Mackenzie resided with two aunts in the Mohawk Valley until his safety demanded that he be sent to Montreal. After only a year in school, Mackenzie took employment with a small firm engaged in the fur trade; it was a timely move, because his father died suddenly in the next year. This initial situation led to a series of positions in the fur industry that ultimately produced a substantial fortune for Mackenzie.

Through a number of expansions and mergers that proved advantageous to the ambitious and clever young man, Mackenzie found himself in charge of the North West Company post at Île-à-la-Croix between 1785 and 1787. During the winter of 1787-88, he worked under Peter Pond in the Athabasca district. Pond speculated that a river Indians said flowed out of the west end of Great Slave Lake was the same that Captain James Cook had reported emptying into the Pacific. Such a river — if it were to exist — would provide a navigable water link between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. But the tempestuous Pond was sent home from the Athabasca in 1788; it was left to Mackenzie to test Pond's hypothesis. In 1789, accompanied by four voyageurs, a young German, a Chipewyan guide named "English Chief," and an assortment of Indian wives and retainers, Mackenzie put his North Canoe into Lake Athabasca at Fort Chipewyan, descended the Slave River, skirted the shores of Great Slave Lake, and travelled down the unknown river until he perceived the rise and fall of the tide in the fog-bound delta. Although he is celebrated today for having discovered this major North American watercourse and for having made the return trip of 5000 km in a phenomenal 102 days, Mackenzie considered his expedition a failure. The river, after all, had not led to the Pacific. According to one popular but unfounded account, Mackenzie used the name "the River Disappointment" when he wrote of the river that today bears his name and guarantees his immortality.

After two years spent managing the Athabasca district and a winter in England making preparations for a second expedition, Mackenzie again set off in search of a navigable passage to the Pacific. 1793 saw him paddling up the Parsnip River, after having wintered at the forks of the Peace and Smoky rivers. He made a difficult carry over the height-of-land into the Fraser River (which he mistook for the Columbia) and descended it until Indians living near modern Alexandria, B.C., advised him not to follow the Fraser down to the ocean but to go back upriver to where the West Road River flows into it. At that juncture, they cached canoe and supplies and trekked overland to reach the Pacific at the mouth of the Bella Coola River. There, on a rock facing the ocean, Mackenzie wrote the famous words with a

mixture of vermilion and melted grease: "Alexander Mackenzie, from Canada by land, the twenty-second of July, one thousand seven hundred and ninety-three." Had he arrived six weeks earlier, he would likely have met Captain George Vancouver, who had sailed up the coast and visited the Bella Bella Indians. Possibly as a consequence of Vancouver's visit, the tribe was decidedly unfriendly toward the small overland party, but Mackenzie managed affairs well, and no one was hurt. Again, although recognized as the first man to cross the breadth of this continent north of Mexico — a feat he achieved more than a decade before the widely extolled Lewis and Clark expedition even set out — Mackenzie considered the expedition a failure, as the strenuous passage he had made was not suitable for trade.

By his thirtieth birthday, Mackenzie's geographical conquests were behind him. A highly nervous and restless Mackenzie returned to Canada, where he spent much of his energy arguing for a reorganization of the fur trade, an idea that involved bringing together the North West Company, the Hudson's Bay Company, and the East India Company. He published the narrative of his two expeditions in 1801; *Voyages from Montreal* contains a lengthy "General History of the Fur Trade" (possibly written by his cousin Roderick Mackenzie) that espouses reorganization. Knighted in 1802, he held enough shares in the New North West Company, later known as the XY Company, that it was sometimes called Sir Alexander Mackenzie & Company. But when the older North West Company merged with the New North West Company, Mackenzie, who had come to be considered a trouble-maker, was denied a role in the new management.

Frustrated, Mackenzie returned to Britain for good in 1810, having already spent much of the past five years there. He was briefly involved with Lord Selkirk's scheme to colonize part of the HBC's holdings, but when he realized the scope of Selkirk's plan, Mackenzie became an outspoken critic of the Red River colony. In 1812, he married Geddes Mackenzie and retired at her family's estate at Avoch, which he purchased for £20 000. He was 48; she was 14. His health began to fail around 1818, and on March 12, 1820, he died while resting at an inn on his way home from London, where he had gone in search of medical advice. He was laid to rest far from the country in which he had secured his fortune and which had made him into one of those "who can afford to leave it."

FURTHER READINGS

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Richard C. Davis
Department of English
University of Calgary
Calgary, Alberta, Canada
T2N 1N4